

VZCZCXRO5112
RR RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHAM #2253/01 2810636
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
R 080636Z OCT 09
FM AMEMBASSY AMMAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6074
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 002253

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/06/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAL](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: AS JORDAN'S GOVERNMENT FADES, REFORM HANGS IN THE
BALANCE

REF: A. AMMAN 2143

[B](#). AMMAN 2098

[C](#). AMMAN 1898 (NOTAL)

[D](#). AMMAN 1804

[E](#). AMMAN 1646

[F](#). AMMAN 1317 (NOTAL)

[G](#). AMMAN 1314 (NOTAL)

[H](#). 08 AMMAN 3116

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#). (S/NF) Summary: The end may be near for the Dahabi government. After two years in office, its inability to advance a coherent political agenda with parliament and the public at large has led to the increasing sense among our contacts that a change is forthcoming. It is less clear, however, what form that change will take. Talk at the highest levels about a potential dissolution of parliament adds to the uncertain atmosphere. What is clear is that reform as envisioned in the 2006 National Agenda is at a standstill, with the Dahabi government failing to advance almost every tenet of the royally endorsed plan. The decision on the road ahead ultimately rests with the King, who has given almost no indication of which way he is leaning. End Summary.

Vultures Circle Over Dahabi Government

[2](#). (C) Jordan is in a period of transition. After nearly two years in power, the government of Nader Al-Dahabi is noticeably losing steam. During the King's long summer absence, Dahabi and his ministers were unable to effectively contain a series of events that betrayed deep divisions under the seemingly calm surface of Jordan's political scene (Ref C). During the extraordinary session of parliament, the government proved itself unprepared and unable to explain the necessity and logic behind either economic reforms (such as changes to the tax code) or political reforms (such as amendments to the Law on Associations).

[3](#). (C) When skeptical legislators began to alter the delicately balanced but poorly explained bills presented by the government, Dahabi requested that the King bring the extraordinary session to an early close in August (Ref D). As the constitutionally mandated October 1 start of parliament's ordinary session approached, it became clear that the government was unprepared or even politically unable to revive its agenda in the legislature. While budget woes were the primary cause of the two month delay in the parliamentary session, the government's inability to mend fences with MPs and salvage its political to-do list were also a large factor (Ref A).

The Guessing Game

[4](#). (S/NF) Royal Court Chief Nasser Lozi confirmed to the Ambassador that the King was pondering a reshuffle of the

Dahabi cabinet. The King has reportedly been noncommittal on a solid course of action, however, and has left the door open for Dahabi's departure as well. With all options currently on the table, even Lozi was hard-pressed to predict how the King would ultimately act.

¶15. (C) Conventional wisdom amongst Amman's political elite is that a change is inevitable, yet our contacts remain divided on what form it will take. Before the parliamentary session was delayed, many assumed that Dahabi would stay on as Prime Minister of a completely new government. Since the delay was announced, our contacts have started to veer towards the notion that Dahabi's job is in jeopardy. There have been no indications from the King, his advisors, or members of the cabinet as to which way the political winds are blowing.

¶16. (C) While the theories about Dahabi's future are pure speculation, it is clear that the current slate of government ministers would have a very difficult time pushing through any political agenda in parliament when it reconvenes in December. MPs see the government as unresponsive to its queries about policy, unwilling to work with lawmakers to form compromise legislation, and unable to effectively explain or defend its agenda on the floor. Our contacts in the lower house are unanimous in their assessment that the government as it is currently configured has burned its bridges and cannot expect to accomplish much of substance in the legislature.

Dissolution Of Parliament Still On The Table

AMMAN 00002253 002 OF 003

¶17. (S/NF) While it seems unlikely in the near term, the possibility of a dissolution of parliament is clearly an option that is being discussed at the highest levels of the Jordanian government (Ref A). During a recent meeting with the Ambassador, Lozi discussed the constitutional and legal details that dissolution would entail -- a clear indication that the practical consequences of dissolution are under review. Article 73 of Jordan's constitution requires that new elections be held within four months of any dissolution of parliament. That deadline can only be extended if the Council of Ministers determines that a "force majeure" has made the holding of elections impossible. If elections are not held within four months of dissolution, the previous parliament is re-seated as if the dissolution had never happened.

¶18. (S/NF) The assumption is that the purpose of dissolving parliament would be to implement a new electoral law to allow for the current gerrymandered tribal parliament (dominated by East Bankers) to be replaced by a truly representative legislature which reflects national political priorities (and the will of Jordan's Palestinian-origin majority) rather than narrow tribal interests. While the King's advisors and the government are keen to usher the current parliament out the door, they have yet to indicate where the road would lead from there. There are no indications that a revamped electoral law, which many in Jordan's political elite assume to be the logical next step of a parliamentary dissolution, is in the process of being formulated. If the King is indeed ready to sweep out parliament and/or the government in order to start with a clean slate, there are no indications at this time that he is preparing the legal and electoral groundwork for such an action.

Reform At A Standstill

¶19. (C) At the time of its appointment in November 2007, many hailed the Dahabi government as the ideal alignment of reformers. As the Dahabi government coincided with Bassem Awadallah's tenure as Chief of the Royal Court, the political

elite believed that the stars were aligning for a major push forward on the political changes envisioned in the royally-endorsed National Agenda. At the very least, it was expected that he would move forward on the agenda's economic aspects. In the intervening two years, however, Dahabi and his government have failed to advance either economic or political reform. The government has chosen to focus instead on containing the short term social consequences of inflation. The structural changes in both the political and economic spheres prescribed by the National Agenda are stalled, with little prospect for movement in the near future (Ref H).

¶10. (SBU) A rundown of the major National Agenda's political themes reads more like a series of wasted opportunities than a list of accomplishments for the Dahabi government:

-- Freedom of the media, while encouraged by the King, continues to languish under formal and informal controls which the Dahabi government has done little to address.

-- Inclusion of civil society institutions in Jordan's political life took a step backward under the restrictive 2008 Law on Associations, with the recently passed amendment package another missed opportunity to address many core concerns about the freedom of NGOs to operate.

-- Political parties remain firmly on the sidelines of Jordanian political life, with the Dahabi government doing virtually nothing to bring them closer to the world of policymaking and political relevance.

-- A new electoral law and a role for parliament in crafting legislation, both of which are specifically called for in the National Agenda, are only distant notions which the government has not even mentioned as serious possibilities.

-- While the government has made noises about altering the legal regime which metes out minimal punishments for honor crimes, the penal code amendments which would have sent a clear message on womens' empowerment were given low priority by the government during the extraordinary session. Consequentially, the amendments were not even considered in the parliament's committee prior to the session's early dissolution.

-- Jordan's justice system is the only area where reform seems to be moving forward, with a sustained commitment by the Dahabi government to institutionalize the professionalization of the judiciary. Even this

AMMAN 00002253 003 OF 003

accomplishment, however, is muted by the unwillingness of the government and judicial branch leadership to advance the financial and administrative autonomy necessary for an independent judiciary to properly function.

The Buck Stops...Where?

¶12. (S/NF) Jordan's politicians are looking intently to the King for direction, eagerly (and in some cases nervously) anticipating a royal ruling on the future of reform. They have received almost nothing. The King has been largely absent from the political scene as of late and sphinxlike in his increasingly rare public appearances. Beyond the usual business of meeting tribal leaders, greeting foreign dignitaries, and cutting ribbons, the King has said nothing to indicate his leanings on the future of the government, parliament, or reform efforts. Our contacts are unsure if the King is genuinely undecided or playing for time, but his lack of decisive action is starting to result in a noticeable policy drift which makes our interlocutors anxious.

¶13. (S/NF) The uncertain status of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is likely a primary factor in the King's reticence

to show his hand. If negotiations begin to demonstrate results, the King will have the domestic political cover necessary to pursue reform across the board, perhaps including a dissolution of parliament. If the current holding pattern continues, however, there will remain little appetite among Jordan's East Banker dominated political system for change which could potentially empower the Palestinian-origin majority. Without the prospect of regional change on the horizon, the King would be more likely to appoint a status quo-oriented figure who would be unlikely to advance reform.

¶14. (S/NF) The fate of reform is also tied to Jordan's fiscal status, which has recently shown further signs of decline (Ref E). As assistance funds dry up, the King has been making the rounds of regional allies in the search for budget support which will see Jordan through the worst of the economic slowdown. His efforts have come to nothing, however, generating concern in Amman about the ever worsening budget deficit. Reform often requires an initial financial investment -- something Jordan's budget may not permit in the near to medium term.

Comment

¶15. (S/NF) The international image of King Abdullah as a progressive reformer often fails to match up with his actions on the ground (Refs F and G). While the prevailing assumption among the Jordanian political elite and outside observers is that the King will make a comprehensive (or even radical) move in support of reform when the time is right, his record to date may not bear that theory out. It will ultimately be up to the King to initiate any process of change in Jordan's political system. The coming change in government, with Dahabi or without him, will be a key test of King Abdullah's stomach for political reform.
Beecroft